

**W. E. B. Du Bois**

# **Two Pieces of His Writing**

**1946 and 1956**

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# Problems of Africa

*Denial of Rights Held Threat to a Democratic World*

**To the Editor of the New York Times:**

Now that the silence of the press and of liberal thought on Africa and its problems has broken briefly, may I venture to stress the critical importance of these matters.

Since the First World War, Africa has been appealing to the world for hearing and redress, in clear logic and modern phrase. With disappointing unanimity, the world has refused to listen, the press has failed to notice, and forward-thinking people have been content to remain ignorant.

In 1915 the Congress of British West Africa, attended by representatives of chiefs, professions and business from four colonies, made a plea for democratic institutions, which deserves to be called a great document.

During the San Francisco conference, the Non-European Unity Committee of the Union of South Africa addressed "A Declaration to the Nations of the World," to which neither our free press nor any member of the conference paid the slightest attention.

## **Protest Quoted**

Dr. A. B. Xuma, a native practicing physician of Capetown, president of the African National Congress of South Africa, now in New York, writes:

“We Africans of South Africa protest and oppose the incorporation of Southwest Africa into the Union. The Africans of Southwest Africa have no share in the Government and therefore are no party in the incorporation negotiations. South Africa itself denies political and economic rights to her 8,000,000 Africans. Eighty-three per cent of the land is reserved for 2,000,000 Europeans only: less than 17% for 8,000,000 Africans. Only 40% of African children are accommodated in mission schools; there are no government schools for African children... Ninety-five per cent of the African prison population is imprisoned for discriminatory regulations used against Africans only... African trade unions are not recognized. In short, Africans are underfed, underpaid, undereducated, underemployed, poorly housed and poorly and indirectly represented.”...

The Cameroon Native Council, under the signature of Etia Moume Leopold, appealed to the United Nations in October, 1946, to be placed under United Nations trusteeship.

In Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Rhodesia and South Africa, strikes against alleged starvation wages, aggravated by sharply rising prices, have been made but neither the world press nor philanthropy has made an adequate effort to inquire into cause and results.

All these matters are not isolated phenomena. They are part of a definite policy, originating in South Africa and in its daughter state Kenya, to separate African colonialism from Asiatic and perpetuate in Africa that slavery, serfdom and exploitation of labor and materials which the wiser world is trying to abolish as the one and only path to democracy. In 1923 the plan was enunciated in a pamphlet published in Nairobi, “The Thermopylae of Africa.”

This plan developed during the First World War by the capture of German East Africa; was pushed further in the Second World War in the attempt to put Kenya and its leaders over Ethiopia. It still persists in the refusal to give Ethiopia access to the sea, by depriving her of Eritrea, and seizing Ogaden, its granary; by garrisoning Ethiopia with British soldiers and airmen, and by the proposed transfer of British military bases to East Africa.

### **Warning to U. N.**

I am calling attention to all this, not simply as a plea for Africa, but as a warning to the United Nations. Is it possible to build one world, free and democratic, on the foundations of a continually enslaved Africa? Of an Africa whose labor at twenty cents a day is in direct competition with the free labor of the world?

Finally, what shall 15,000,000 Negroes in the United States, many more than the population of the Argentine, and of Belgium and Holland combined, do to secure recognition of their rights as human beings at the hands of the peoples of the world? They are in majority disenfranchised. Their disenfranchisement in the South makes democracy unworkable in the nation and a third party movement impossible. Their rights of travel, domicile, use of public facilities, and right to work are widely infringed. Five thousand of them in fifty years have been lynched by mobs without trial and no lyncher has been punished; because as the Attorney General of the nation admits, the law gives him no adequate ground on which to prosecute.

Is this the way to build a world? Is even the atomic bomb of greater importance than the freedom and manhood of 200,000,000 black men?

**W. E. B. DU BOIS**

**New York, Nov. 8, 1946.**

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# Gandhi and the American Negroes

**W. E. B. Du Bois, 1956**

*[Dr. William Edward Burghart DuBois (1868-1963), the great African-American writer, sociologist and historian, fighter against racism and a founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People, and leader of the Pan African movement, was a friend of India. Greeting him on his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday in February 1948, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru said: "India remembers with gratitude your sympathy during her struggle for freedom".]*

Mohandas Gandhi was born nineteen months after my birth. As a school-boy in a small town in the north-eastern part of the United States, I knew little of Asia and the schools taught less. The one tenuous link which bound me to India was skin colour. That was important in America and even in my town, although little was said about it. But I was conscious of being the only brown face in my school and although my dark family had lived in this valley for two hundred years or more, I was early cognisant of a status different from that of my white school-mates.

As I grew up there seemed to be no future for me in the place of my birth, and at seventeen I went South, where formerly coloured people had been slaves, so that I could be trained to work among them. There at Fisk University I first became aware of a world of coloured folk and I learned not only of the condition of American Negroes but began to read of China and India; and to make Africa the special object of my study. I published my first book in 1896 while Gandhi was in South Africa, and my subject was the African slave trade. We did not at the time have much direct news from Africa in the American newspapers, but I did have several black students from South Africa and began to sense the tragedy of that awful land. It was not until after the First World War that I came to realise Gandhi's work for Africa and the world.

I was torn by the problem of peace. As a youth I was certain that freedom for the coloured peoples of the earth would come only by war; by doing to white Europe and America what they had done to black Africa and coloured Asia. This seemed the natural conclusion from the fairy tales called history on which I had been nourished. Then in the last decades of the 19th century, as I came to manhood, I caught the vision of world peace and signed the pledge never to take part in war.

With the First World War came my first knowledge of Gandhi. I came to know Lajpat Rai and Madame Naidu.<sup>1</sup> John Haynes Holmes<sup>2</sup> was one of my co-workers in the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured people, and he was a friend and admirer of Gandhi. Indeed the "Coloured People" referred to in our name was not originally confined to America. I remember the discussion we had on inviting Gandhi to visit America and how we were forced to conclude that this land was not civilised enough to receive a coloured man as an honoured guest.

In 1929, as the Depression loomed, I asked Gandhi for a message to American Negroes, which I published in the *Crisis*. He said: "Let not the 12 million Negroes be ashamed of the fact that they are the grandchildren of slaves. There is dishonour in being slave-owners. But let us not think of honour or dishonour in connection with the past. Let us realise that the future is with those who would be pure, truthful and loving. For as the old wise men have said: Truth ever is, untruth never was. Love alone binds and truth and love accrue only to the truly humble."

This was written on May day, 1929. Through what phantasmagoria of hurt and evil the world has passed since then! We American Negroes have reeled and staggered from side to side and forward and back. In the First World War, we joined with American capital to keep Germany and Italy from sharing the spoils of colonial imperialism. In the Depression we sank beneath the burden of poverty, ignorance and disease due to discrimination, unemployment and crime. In the Second World War, we again joined Western capital against Fascism and failed to realise how the Soviet Union sacrificed her blood and savings to save the world.

But we did realise how out of war began to arise a new coloured world free from the control of Europe and America. We began too to realise the role of Gandhi and to evaluate his work as a guide for the black people of the United States. As an integral part of this country, as workers, consumers and co-creators of its culture, we could not look forward to physical separation except as a change of masters. But what of Gandhi's programme of peace and non-violence? Only in the last year have American Negroes begun to see the possibility of this programme being applied to the Negro problems in the United States.

Personally I was long puzzled. After the World Depression, I sensed a recurring contradiction. I saw Gandhi's non-violence gain freedom for India, only to be followed by violence in all the world. I realised that the vaunted "hundred years of peace", from Waterloo to the Battle of the Marne, was not peace at all but war, of

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<sup>1</sup> Lala Lajpat Rai, a leader of the Indian National Congress, was in exile in the United States during the First World War and organised support for Indian freedom. Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, poetess and leader of the Congress, visited the United States in 1928-29.

<sup>2</sup> The Reverend John Haynes Holmes (1879-1964) - clergyman, author, editor and a leader of movements for peace, racial equality and civil liberties - was one of the earliest admirers of Gandhiji in the United States.

Europe and North America on Africa and Asia, with only troubled bits of peace between the colonial conquerors. I saw Britain, France, Belgium and North America trying to continue to force the world to serve them by monopoly of land, technique and machines, backed by physical force which has now culminated in the use of atomic power. Only the possession of this power by the Soviet Union prevents the restoration of colonial imperialism of the West over Asia and Africa, under the leadership of men like Dulles and Eden. Perhaps in this extraordinary impasse the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi may have a chance to prevail in the world. Recent events in the former slave territory of the United States throw a curious light on this possibility.

In Montgomery, Alabama, the former capital of the Confederate States which fought for years to make America a slave nation, the black workers last year refused any longer to use the public buses on which their seats had long been segregated from those of the white passengers, paying the same fare. In addition to separation, there was abuse and insult by the white conductors. This custom had continued for 75 years. Then last year a coloured seamstress got tired of insult and refused to give her seat to a white man. The black workers led by young, educated ministers began a strike which stopped the discrimination, aroused the state and the nation and presented an unbending front of non-violence to the murderous mob which hitherto has ruled the South. The occurrence was extraordinary. It was not based on any first-hand knowledge of Gandhi and his work. Their leaders like Martin Luther King knew of non-resistance in India; many of the educated teachers, business and professional men had heard of Gandhi. But the rise and spread of this movement was due to the truth of its underlying principles and not to direct teaching or propaganda. In this aspect it is a most interesting proof of the truth of the Gandhian philosophy.

The American Negro is not yet free. He is still discriminated against, oppressed and exploited. The recent court decisions in his favour are excellent but are as yet only partially enforced. It may well be that the enforcement of these laws and real human equality and brotherhood in the United States will come only under the leadership of another Gandhi.

**Course: African Revolutionary Writing**

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